

# Online Research @ Cardiff

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/126484/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Jimenez Martinez, Cesar ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2921-0832> 2019.  
Book Review: Stories without borders: The Berlin Wall and the making of a global iconic event. Media, Culture and Society 41 (5) , pp. 751-753.  
10.1177/0163443717741358 file

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0163443717741358>  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0163443717741358>>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies.

See

<http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



**Sonnevend J, *Stories without Borders: The Berlin Wall and the Making of a Global Iconic Event*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.**

Published a quarter of a century ago, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (Dayan & Katz, 1992) is perhaps one of the most influential works in the history of media and communications studies. Since its original publication, the concept of media events has been dissected and debated by several scholars, who have praised Dayan and Katz for their emphasis on ‘outstanding’ episodes rather than on the ‘ordinary’ or ‘average’ (Hepp & Couldry, 2010, p. 2). Some of these authors have also pointed out the shortcomings of this seminal work, and have suggested alternative terminologies to understand those extraordinary occasions covered by –and often constructed in complicity with– the media, such as ‘media rituals’, ‘media spectacles’ or ‘popular media events’ (e.g. Cottle, 2006; Couldry, 2003; Hepp & Vogelgesang, 2003; Kellner, 2010). Part of the enduring allure of *Media Events* is evidenced by the fact that Dayan and Katz have at different times revisited their original ideas, in order to update them as well as to address some criticisms, as a recent special issue in this journal shows (Katz & Dayan, 2017; see also Dayan, 2008; Katz & Liebes, 2007).

A recent addition to the discussion is Julia Sonnevend’s book *Stories without Borders: The Berlin Wall and the Making of a Global Iconic Event*. Drawing on some of the criticisms of Dayan and Katz’s original work, this study takes the debate one step further, proposing the concept of *global iconic events*. That is, ‘news events that international media cover extensively and remember ritually’ (p. 20). The concept is a significant contribution. Whilst several revisions to Dayan and Katz’s original arguments focus on issues of *space*, centring on how the same event is interpreted in different ways across various settings, Sonnevend’s definition introduces a more *historical* perspective, highlighting how specific episodes gain significance not only in several locations, but also over time. She points out that when these occurrences are remembered, they ‘come to represent something larger’ (p. 21) than the originally communicated episode. The book identifies five dimensions that characterise global iconic events: *foundation*, being the previous knowledge of the event’s context; *mythologization*, the narration of the event

in globally resonant ways; *condensation*, the reduction of the event to a particular image or phrase; *counter-narration*, the existence of alternative re-interpretations of the event; and *remediation*, the communication of the event across different media in various settings.

The book applies these five dimensions of global iconic events to one of the most well known episodes of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century: the fall of the Berlin Wall. Drawing on American, West German, East German and Soviet media coverage, as well as secondary sources detailing the experiences of journalists following the event, the author reminds readers that the 'Wall' was actually a complex system of different kinds of barriers separating East and West Germany. In addition, its 'fall' was a series of random and sometimes clumsy episodes that only over time crystallised into the embodiment of freedom and the end of the Cold War.

Throughout the chapters, the author stresses that global iconic events are not merely covered by the media. Instead, the media are a constitutive agent, contributing to the storytelling and mythologisation of these occurrences, and inviting audiences to remember them in specific ways. Of particular interest is the section about counter-narration. This reveals that the East German and Soviet media paid very little attention to the opening of the inner German border in 1989. Indeed, the 'fall of the Wall' was mostly framed as one of the many administrative decisions taken by the East German government, whilst allegedly engaging in a process of political renewal at the same time.

*Stories without Borders* is well structured, never deviating from the five dimensions proposed by the author as a framework. Such clarity makes the main argument particularly easy to follow, and is definitely one of its strengths. Yet at the same time, the structure is also one of its shortcomings. When looking at the detail provided by the author about the role of the media during the fall of the Berlin Wall, various potential theoretical avenues emerge that could have strengthened the book's core argument. I will mention two.

The first refers to the fact that this is ultimately a book about time. The empirical chapters examine not only how the media covered the fall of the Berlin Wall while it was taking place, but also how they have contributed to the interpretation and re-enactment of this episode. The book shows how the first anniversary of the fall of the Wall competed for public commemoration in Germany with other events that had taken place on the same date, notably Kristallnacht in 1938. Notwithstanding, the fall of the Wall ended up prevailing and even became a transportable analogy, which could be used with regards to China's internet policy, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as Mexican-American relations. Yet this study engages very little with theories of change over time. This could have been a major contribution to the field, considering that media and communications studies have traditionally overlooked this subject (see Stanyer & Mihelj, 2016).

Secondly, whilst *Stories without Borders* acknowledges that the myth of the fall of the Berlin Wall has been appropriated with different aims, it does not delve too deep into its political, commercial and ideological exploitation. The study briefly mentions how private interests have competed to erase or preserve traces of the wall in Berlin, yet it overlooks the everyday commodification of the Wall –for instance, in the mostly fake stones that can be found in souvenir shops all over Berlin. In addition, although the book convincingly shows how the East German and Soviet media conveniently downplayed the events in Berlin, it could also have examined how the myth of the fall of the Wall fits within the notions of individualism emphasised by the neoliberal paradigm, whose global spread was facilitated by the end of the Cold War (Harvey, 2005).

Despite these shortcomings, *Stories without Borders* is very-well written and is a significant addition to the literature on media events, and to the field of media studies as a whole. It will definitely be of interest for researchers, teachers, as well as undergraduate and postgraduate students in media, cultural studies, political communication and history. The book reads as an invitation to continue the discussion, testing Sonnevend's ideas through the examination of other global iconic events.

César Jiménez-Martínez

Brunel University and London School of Economics and Political Science, London,  
United Kingdom

## References

- Cottle, S. (2006). Mediatized rituals: beyond manufacturing consent. *Media, Culture & Society*, 28(3), 411–432.
- Couldry, N. (2003). *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*. London: Routledge.
- Dayan, D. (2008). Beyond Media Events: Disenchantment, Derailment, Disruption. In M. E. Price & D. Dayan (Eds.), *Owning the Olympics: Narratives of the new China* (pp. 391–403). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Dayan, D., & Katz, E. (1992). *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hepp, A., & Couldry, N. (2010). Introduction: media events in globalized media cultures. In N. Couldry, A. Hepp, & F. Krotz (Eds.), *Media Events in a Global Age* (pp. 1–20). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Hepp, A., & Vogelgesang, W. (Eds.). (2003). *Populäre Events: Medienevents, Spielevents und Spaßevents*. Opladen: Leske + Budrich.
- Katz, E., & Dayan, D. (2017). L’esprit de l’escalier: 25 years of hindsight. *Media, Culture & Society*, 1–10.
- Katz, E., & Liebes, T. (2007). “No more peace !”: How disaster, terror and war have upstaged media events. *International Journal of Communication*, 1(1), 157–166.
- Kellner, D. (2010). Media spectacle and media events. In N. Couldry, A. Hepp, & F. Krotz (Eds.), *Media Events in a Global Age* (pp. 76–91). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Stanyer, J., & Mihelj, S. (2016). Taking time seriously? Theorizing and researching change in communication and media studies. *Journal of Communication*, 66(2), 266–279.